

Contentment = Flee, Follow, Fight

1 Timothy 6:6-19
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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September 21, 2025

Do you consider yourself to be a contented person? I'm not referring to being joyful or even being happy, but being content. What's the difference? Being content is more akin to finding **satisfaction in life**, being at ease in one's situation, body, mind, and spirit. It involves an element of being at peace, regardless of what's going on around us. This applies to things like **finding contentment in what you have and in who you are**. You may have heard a popular definition of contentment in relation to the possessions we own, "Contentment is not having all you want but wanting only what you have." Contentment, then, is primarily derived from **focusing on, and being thankful for, what you have in life, rather than obsessing over what you don't have, or wish you had**.

The pursuit of contentment is a central thread running through many philosophical and religious traditions and endeavors, spanning across diverse cultures, times, and geographies. It's not surprising, then, to find reference to contentment in our scriptures. For instance, **Hebrews 13:5** reads, "Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, for God has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.'"

Today's Epistle reading from **1 Timothy 6** also reveals some similar guidance when it comes to finding contentment in life. This long passage can perhaps be summarized in the following way – remember **the three F's: flee, follow, and fight**. As a guide to seeking contentment in life it helps to recognize that there are:

- **certain things we should flee from**
- **certain things we should follow**
- **certain things we should fight for**

I'll return to these in a moment. Today's sermon text comes from Chapter 6, the conclusion to this biblical letter. It consists of many **exhortations**, which is a fancy term that means **words of encouragement, advice, or warning**. Many of these exhortations are about the **danger of pursuing wealth**, which is something that can indeed contribute to discontentment. Evidently, there were some in Timothy's community of faith that had the view that living a godly life would generate wealth. In my opinion, there are still far too many so-called "prosperity gospel" preachers that have the same misguided, and basically unbiblical, philosophy and theology.

It is in this context that the author counters in verse 6, "**Of course, there is great gain in godliness,**" **but he adds this necessary qualifier, "combined with contentment."** So yes, in one regard, being a person of faith *does* yield high dividends, but only when we are content with what we have.

Our text sketches a life of faith as one that moves the pursuit of wealth and possessions to the periphery, rather than being at the center of our lives, where God should be. It recognizes money as necessary and valuable, but never of ultimate value. As I have

mentioned in previous sermons, **notice that the passage does not state the common misperception, “money is the root of all evil.”** Instead, it rightly reveals that **it is the desire for, or love of money that is a root.** Note also, it **doesn’t say that it is the root of all evil, but rather is a root of all kinds of evil.** That is a very different thing.

The biblical author cautions us, then, about getting caught up with the trappings of life, especially when they distract us from loving God, loving our neighbors, and loving ourselves. In a verse that has also become very familiar in popular culture, he writes in verse 7, “we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it.” This view encourages us to see riches and possessions as simply decorations (albeit oftentimes necessary) along the way between birth and death. That’s why he goes on to state, **“but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these.”** But let’s be honest, how many of us in our culture and society today would actually be content with just the minimal basics of life? A look inside our clothes closets, for example, can reveal just how far we are from being content with minimal basics. We tend to forget that a majority of the world’s population has to live on a day-to-day basis with only the barest of necessities of life, and far too many below even that level of daily subsistence.

At the very end of today’s passage the author returns again to the issue of wealth, not as a warning, however, but with a set of **instructions for those who are rich.** And yes, according to world standards **that includes all of us.** He makes three points. **First**, the rich are charged not to be haughty or arrogant, flaunting what we have acquired. A humble spirit, then, is seen as the proper corrective.

Second, we are reminded of the uncertainty of riches and urged to rely on God who is the source of all we have. As many of us have learned, either because of the downturn in the economy, overspending, or a personal tragedy, money in the bank can provide a false sense of security. For it is true, perhaps for some in this congregation, that sometimes wealth is here today and gone tomorrow.

Third, riches can have a very positive value, but only when persons are generous. Verse 17 advises, **“As for those who in the present age are rich...they are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share.”**

(By the way, if you haven’t realized this yet, feel free to consider all this as part of an early stewardship sermon.)

Bracketed by all these instructions on riches and wealth in today’s Epistle reading are the imperatives I referred to earlier: to **flee**, **follow**, and **fight**. After those cautions about the dangers inherent in pursuing wealth, the biblical author tells Timothy in verse 11, “But as for you, person of God, shun all this.” As Christians, therefore, we are faced with times when it is best to **flee** or run away from certain things. Earlier in this chapter, the author reveals that **contentment in life can result, in part, from fleeing from such things as conceit, combativeness, greed, envy, and craving for controversy** (especially in connection with a church setting). All these things, and so many others – like destructive behaviors and attitudes – will only create difficulty in life. They can lead us away from the ways of God and of finding contentment. So in this regard, let me ask you:

- Is there anything going on in your life right now that you think you should flee from, or at least set aside?
- Is there anything you can think of that is leading you away from the ways of God and therefore, away from contentment?

If so, the imperative to flee from such things may be just the word that you need to hear at this moment in time. Many work toward this by **simplifying and seeking balance in their lives**. Therefore, let me ask:

- What aspects of your daily life can you remove that aren't fulfilling, beneficial, and life-giving to you?

The second imperative to finding contentment is to **follow**. This, of course, should remind us of Jesus' invitation, "Follow me." More specifically, six things are listed that relate to how we can best live our lives on a daily basis. We're told in verse 11 to **follow after and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness**. Going back to my days before seminary, I memorized this list and prayed for them regularly. "**God, help me to live my life today marked by righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness.**" Perhaps this simple prayer can be of help to you in finding contentment.

Finally, after *fleeing* from things that are harmful, and *following* godly virtues and behaviors, the third imperative is to **fight**. In yet another well-known scripture passage, Timothy is encouraged, metaphorically, to "**fight the good fight of the faith.**" This is active, dynamic language. And though I resist language that encourages violence in any way, verbally as well as physically, including my disdain for the term "prayer warriors", are there not indeed things we metaphorically need to fight for in life? **What are the issues you currently feel called to fight for? What about us together as a community of faith? My list would include the following four items.**

1. Fight for inclusiveness. This includes justice, diversity, equity, and respect for *all* people. That includes anti-racism work, acceptance of persons from other cultural and faith traditions, and recognition of our own privilege.
2. Closely related to the first, fight for the dismantling of ignorance, fear, and prejudice in our personal lives, church life, and certainly within our culture and society.
3. Fight for the transformation of systems that lead to war, poverty, mass incarceration, hunger, and homelessness.
4. And certainly important right now, fight for democracy! That includes freedom of speech. And for many of us, the right to protest.

The list of issues and causes that each of us are called to fight for could go on for pages. "Fighting the good fight of the faith," therefore, should remind us that **being a person of faith often comes with struggle and conflict, as much as many hope to avoid such things**. Yet, throughout all this let us remember **God is the source of our strength, inspiration, perseverance, and courage**. Recognizing God's roll in this is part of the difference between approaching our efforts as **ministry, not just advocacy**. And these things are often found in and through the encouragement and support of each other.

Therefore, the search for contentment in your life, in our life, just might be aided by the Three F's: Flee, Follow, and Fight.

There is indeed great gain in godliness... combined with contentment!

Amen.